

Volume 2 - Chapter 76 - The Plan

“Steel Constellations: The Backbone of Sovereign Space”

When civilians think of UHF space, they often imagine our sleek and imposing warships cutting through the Void or Integration ceremonies inside shining halls on the most prosperous planets our Faction has to offer.

What they rarely picture are the silent giants that make all of it possible: The Stations.

At the lowest tier are the humble *Resupply Stations*.

They dot the starchart like the stars themselves, with several in nearly every settled system.

Most are little more than armored fuel depots with docking rings and automated cargo spines, built for efficiency. Some also feature repair crews or maintenance workers, but rarely do any of them sprawl out beyond a few thousand people aboard at any given time.

Civilian freighters top off fuel and pick up standardized cargo loads.

Patrol corvettes cycle through for ammunition and maintenance checks.

They are not glamorous, but without them, *nothing* moves. The UHF's logistical web depends on these quiet outposts more than any hero ship or decorated Admiral.

Then there are the *Major Stations*.

Larger, brighter, and often bustling with several millions of residents, they serve as both resupply hubs and genuine population centers.

Entire districts stretch along their inner rings—entertainment sectors glowing under miniature artificial suns, industrial blocks humming with fabrication lines, public parks simulating open skies for those who miss planetary gravity.

People are born there, grow up there, and die there. Entire generations of Space-born will never set foot off of that station, while tourists from the various planets of the UHF come to visit for the novelty of space-bound life.

At the same time, these stations, much like everything in our galaxy, remain semi-military installations at their very core.

Their docking bays can convert to fleet support in hours.

Their defensive grids can power up at a moment's notice to support a fleet's retreat.

There are usually several of these per quadrant, acting as cultural and trading hubs as much as logistical anchors in cases of dire emergencies.

Far more secretive are the *Strategic Stations*.

Their numbers are classified, their locations carefully guarded.

These are not places for tourists or casual docking. They are armored citadels, layered with defensive batteries and defensive arrays that rival small fleets.

Here, task forces gather before deployment.
Here, capital ships cycle in and out for deep refits.

Losing one would not just be a tragedy—like with the Major Stations, where even the loss of several million lives, while devastating, would still be something the UHF could stomach.

Instead, it would cripple the Navy's operational flexibility across an entire region of space.

Fleet movements would slow, supply lines would stretch thin, and deployment windows would narrow to dangerous margins. As a result, these installations are among the most heavily defended assets the UHF maintains outside of active warzones.

And finally, there are the *Headquarters Stations*.

These are the crown jewels.

An HQ Station is not merely a resupply point, a population hub or a strategic anchor.

It is all of the above, and more.

It provides the core infrastructure for the Allbright System's Integration processes inside UHF space that isn't planet-bound. It houses command centers, recruitment cores, and the administrative backbone of entire Star-Sector-Clusters.

Declaring an HQ is staggeringly expensive, requiring massive amounts of System Credits and Merit—but the benefits are equally massive. Each HQ projects a sphere of sovereignty, automatically enforcing UHF territorial claims within its effective range.

If an HQ stands, nearby space is protected by the System's authority. Battlefield warnings trigger. Engagement protocols enforce order. Enemy incursions are not subtle.

If an HQ falls, that protection goes with it.

The surrounding regions become open hunting grounds. No automated claims. No pre-emptive warnings. No negotiated buffers. Unless fleets are already present—and for a Navy as stretched as the UHF's, that is almost never the case—the enemy gains room to maneuver almost instantly. Entire corridors of space can shift hands overnight.

There are only a handful of HQ Stations per Star-Sector-Cluster. Each one is a linchpin in the UHF's war effort. Their defense is not simply important but downright existential.

Ships win battles.
Stations, however, win wars.

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“So... looks like I’m not the only one who has to prepare for a Challenge anymore, huh?” Lucas asked, side-eyeing Thea from the cushioned armchair he was lounging in inside Alpha Squad’s dorm.

They had just returned from the Grand Assembly and had gathered for what was technically a crisis meeting—though it felt more like a cautious celebration.

The biggest win of the day had been Desmond not getting Challenged.

That far outweighed Thea being called on to honor her public Challenge.

Hers had pretty much been expected when she had issued that Challenge at the Awards Ceremony. The only real surprise had been *who* had stepped up to take it.

“It’ll be fine... I’m pretty sure,” Thea said with a small shrug. “I stand by what I said back then: I can beat anyone in this Drive—no exceptions.”

She felt the weight of their gazes and glanced around, only to find no doubt in any of their eyes. The warmth that spread through her chest caught her slightly off guard—they trusted her judgement completely.

Still, she couldn’t help wavering just a bit as she continued, “I *am* concerned that it’s Tiberius, though. The way he set all that up, getting two Challenges in the same cycle... It was definitely well planned. I can’t shake the thought that he *might* have some kind of ace up his sleeve.”

She let out a quiet breath. “In a straight comparison or a fight? I’m confident. I can win that, no problem. But we don’t actually know how these Challenges are judged, do we? We don’t know what, exactly, the Brass is looking for when they decide who stays in Alpha. That’s true for me, as well as Lucas. That’s the only reason I’m not one hundred percent relaxed about it. I should be able to handle him. I just... I don’t like the whole unknown.”

Corvus nodded slowly. “Yeah. That’s the biggest question mark, isn’t it?”

All eyes shifted toward him as he lowered the datapad he had been quietly taking notes on the whole time.

“We don’t know enough about how the Challenges work at a fundamental level to make any informed decisions on how to handle this,” Corvus said calmly. “UHF101 covered the basics, sure, but it left a lot of things open.”

His eyes moved from Lucas to Thea, flinching just slightly at the direct contact. “You two were meeting with another Marine recently, right? She said she had more detailed information about how the Challenge system functions?”

They both nodded, and Thea already knew exactly where he was going with this.

'He's right... We need to talk to Evelyne as soon as possible. She sounded like she had the entire Challenge System mapped out already.'

"I'd say it's imperative that you speak to her again as soon as you can," Corvus continued. "So we can prepare for every possibility as a squad. Our cohesion is extremely strong—honestly, it's a small Emperor blessed miracle. There's no real friction between any of us."

His gaze flicked briefly to Desmond, and he gave him a solid nod. "And our overall synergy is excellent. From what I've heard in the Squad Leader meetings, that's definitely not the norm for the Drive."

He took a slow breath, and when he spoke again, his voice carried a firmness he rarely used. "I don't want any of you leaving this squad. We'll do whatever it takes to make sure both Lucas and Thea get through their Challenges. As a squad. If that means dropping other priorities for a while, then we drop them. We handle this together. Understood?"

"Yes, Sir," Desmond replied immediately, throwing in a sloppy salute.

"You got it, Boss," Isabella said easily.

Kara just shrugged. "You already know I'm in."

Corvus smiled, clearly having expected nothing else, then looked back at Lucas and Thea. "So. What do you need? How can we help? You've got all of Alpha Squad at your disposal. Use us."

Thea's eyes flicked to Lucas, who met her gaze with the usual slight flinch. There was a clear question in his expression, silently asking her to take the lead like she had in most of their planning regarding the Challenges so far.

She let out a quiet sigh and thought for a second before deciding. "Alright... So. First, like Corvus said, we need to talk to our little informant again. Lucas, can you set something up for tomorrow? I know it's only been a day since the last meeting, but I doubt she'll mind."

Lucas nodded immediately and pulled out his private datapad, likely already drafting the message.

"Second..." Thea continued, folding her arms as she organized her thoughts. "We need more information. She's been really good at collecting data so far, but I have no idea if she has anything on Tiberius. And even if she *does*, we don't know what she might charge for that information. She was definitely at the Grand Assembly too, after all. She saw the Challenge being issued directly. Supply and demand and all that, so prices might be different for something directly related to me."

She exhaled slowly. "And if she *doesn't* have anything on him, I have no idea how long she'll take to get some, or if she even can. So we'll need to gather our own intel anyway..."

Her head turned toward Corvus. "You think you can dig up something on him? You said he's been pretty active in the Squad Leader meetings, right?"

“Yeah. One of the more vocal SLs in the Drive,” Corvus confirmed, tilting his head slightly as he considered it. After a moment, he gave a small nod. “I think I can get us something. I don’t know how much, or how useful it’ll be, but he’s been moving between different groups of Marines over the past few weeks. Someone out there has to know *something*. Combat style, general build direction, habits... That kind of stuff. Anything helps, I guess. I can’t promise gold here, but I won’t come back empty-handed, that much I will guarantee.”

“Perfect,” Thea said, then looked over at Desmond, Isabella, and Karania. “For you three... I don’t have anything super specific yet, but Lucas and I will definitely need extra bodies for training. We’ll have to be ready for a wide range of opponents. Just having you around now and then will help with variety, no matter what else we might find for you to help with.”

“Sure,” Desmond agreed right away. “Just tell me when and I’ll clear space. Want me there tomorrow already? I’ve got nothing else planned.”

It still felt a little strange how quick Desmond was to offer help, considering how things had started between them. Thea blinked at him for a second, but before she could answer, Isabella cut in.

The Offensive Heavy scratched the back of her head with a slight grimace. “Uh... small issue. I’ve got a Skill Class tomorrow... Already paid for it and everything. Sorry about that. I’ll run stuff by you in the future, though?”

Thea waved her off. “No worries. We’ve got three weeks. We won’t need you every single time.” She turned back to Desmond and nodded. “Yeah. The earlier you start, the better. It’ll help your own style too, training directly against Alpha Squad members. I doubt you’ve had much high-level pressure in DMs yet. At Grade 0, they’ve been pretty basic—at least in the one I’ve taken part in so far.”

Desmond nodded. “Agreed. I’ll be there. Lucas, send me the time?”

Lucas gave him an easy thumbs-up.

“As for you, Kara,” Thea continued, “having you around as much as possible would help in a lot of ways. Not just for the training, of course but for your brain.”

“Aww, you think my brain’s that useful?” Kara teased immediately.

Thea rolled her eyes. “You know what I mean.”

“I’ve wanted to see that little informant of yours up close anyway,” Kara said, her tone sharpening just a bit. “So I’m definitely in for tomorrow. I do have a bunch of Skill Classes I want to squeeze in over the next three weeks, but I’ll check with you before I sign up for anything. We’ll make a schedule. I can still finish what I planned and help you two prep properly for the Challenges as well.”

“That works,” Thea said, relieved at how smoothly this was coming together.

“Anything I’m missing?” She asked, looking back at Corvus.

He was just sitting there with a wide, toothy grin aimed directly at her.

“*What?*” she frowned. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“No reason,” he replied immediately—far too quickly to be believable. “You haven’t missed anything I would’ve suggested, honestly. I’ll let you know if I think of something that could help with the training. And I’ll try to drop by for some of the actual arcade sessions too.”

He leaned back slightly, folding his arms. “That informant of yours—like Karania said—does sound *very* interesting, after all. I didn’t know we had someone like that in this Drive... I’m still a little suspicious about how you two even got in contact with her, to be honest. But we can dig into that later, once things line up better on my end.”

He gave a small shrug. “I’ve got a Skill Class tomorrow too, same as Isabella. After that, I’ll reach out to a few Marines Tiberius has been hanging around with these past weeks. See if the Emperor’s feeling generous and lets me shake something loose that can help us out. I’ll check in with Lucas for the schedule after?”

Lucas shot him a thumbs-up as well. “Yep.”

“Great. Let’s put a pin in that and call it a night, then.” Corvus slapped his hands against his knees and pushed himself up from the cushioned armchair in one smooth motion. “Three weeks. Then the Challenges will show whether all of this was worth it. So let’s give it our best shot and keep Alpha together.”

He stepped closer and held his hand out toward the center of the group. “Haven’t done one of these in a while, but... Oo-Rah?”

Thea scoffed despite herself—and judging by Isabella’s loud huff right next to her, she wasn’t the only one—but they all stood up anyway and stacked their hands together.

“To Alpha Squad—as it is and shall ever be,” Corvus declared grandly.

“*Oo-Rah!*” they answered in unison, their voices overlapping before dissolving into laughter at how ridiculous that whole thing had sounded.

Still, as they broke apart and headed toward their rooms, Thea felt a warm, steady comfort settle in her chest. It had been over-the-top. Downright cringe-worthy, even.

But the easy smiles on everyone’s faces told her she probably wasn’t the only one who had needed that...

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PoV: Evelynne Midra Sen

Receiving another invitation for more MMM-time this quickly after the last one might have made her suspicious, if not for the Grand Assembly and its very public reveal that Thea herself had been forced to issue her Challenge.

What she was being called in for was obvious to Evelyne: Specific information on the format of the Challenges and on Tiberius Soren.

The first part? No issue. The second...

'I knew there was a group of morons trying to outdo each other to crown their own moron-champion to Challenge her, but Tiberius being part of it...? I should've paid more attention to that side of things, damn it,' she thought, annoyed with herself.

Tiberius had definitely not bought into the whole anti-Cyan or anti-Thea nonsense.

Of that much, Evelyne was certain.

He had simply found the most efficient way to secure the Challenge for himself without tipping his hand too early—and he had done it in a way she had to respect.

'Couldn't have done it better myself, honestly,' she admitted.

In fact, she was doing something very similar right at this very moment.

She was biding her time on the Beta Squad entry she had quietly promised the Sovereign, planning to use a Public Leaderboard Challenge instead of an Assessment one. That way, she could stay under Thea's radar just a little longer—and make sure the defending Beta member would have as little time as possible to prepare.

"Not that it'll matter for them either way," she chuckled softly as she turned the corner toward the meeting spot in front of the arcade—the same place they had met just two days ago for their last, brutally long training session.

A session she hadn't even asked payment for.

She had been so thoroughly dismantled by the proximity to her MMM, and by the revelation of the Sovereign's cover-up—and everything *that* implied—that she hadn't had the mental space to negotiate properly without risking blurting out something she absolutely shouldn't have.

But that would be different today.

Fourteen hours of nearly uninterrupted MMM-time had built at least a little resistance against Thea's unnatural pull. Not immunity. But enough.

'I'll get my private conversation time with her today. No matter what. My parents would flay me again if they knew what kind of information I basically handed out for free last time...'

Even despite all her self-control, she couldn't keep her body from shuddering at the thought.

Evelyne kept her pace steady as she approached the arcade, arriving earlier than strictly necessary—as she always did.

She preferred it that way.

Being early meant having time to observe, to position herself, to control the first few moments of any interaction. Home-field advantage mattered a lot when it came to social interactions. Especially when the people she was dealing with were anything but ordinary.

Which was why she almost stumbled when she rounded the last corner.

More than half of Alpha Squad was *already* there.

She forced herself not to slow down.

Not to hesitate. Not to show the slightest flicker of surprise on her face.

But internally, her thoughts skidded to a screeching halt.

She had expected Callahan—obviously. And her Thea, of course. But instead she was greeted by nearly the entire squad—everyone but Itoku and, *thankfully*, Sylarion.

That he wasn't here was, apparently, the Emperor's only mercy for her that day.

Because the largest immediate danger to her had very much decided to tag along with her Thea—and was practically glued to her in all the *wrong* ways.

Karania Faulkner.

The brown curls of the medic bounced as she laughed at something Thea had said, the sound bright and genuine even from this distance.

There was no forced politeness in it. No strategic calculation audible on the surface.

'I'll be in your spot one day, Faulkner. Enjoy it while it lasts,' Evelyne thought bitterly.

She erased the emotion immediately. Anger was sloppy—and envy even more so.

'This session is going to be far more exhausting than the last after all, isn't it...?'

Outside of Sylarion—who would recognize her instantly, being a Legacy and all—Faulkner was the true problem.

The fact that neither Callahan nor her Thea had called her out so far was still a complete mystery to Evelyne. Sylarion should *absolutely* be aware of the Sen Legacy. He *should* have said something by now—warned them about what her family was known for.

Yet, for some reason, there was still no sign he had done anything of the sort.

It was... beyond troubling, honestly.

But Karania Faulkner?

That one was different in a way she couldn't quite put into words.

Evelyne's gaze locked with the medic's as Faulkner's wandering eyes finally met hers, and a quiet shiver traced down her spine.

There was something thoroughly *off* about Karania Faulkner—something she couldn't quite name. A sharpness behind the warmth she seemed to radiate. A certain cleanliness beneath the easy smiles she handed out so freely.

And that was saying something fierce, coming from a Sen; Evelyne was *very* aware of the irony there.

Out of everyone in Alpha Squad—including Sylarion—Faulkner was the one Evelyne had the least actionable intelligence on. There were no clean patterns to observe with her. No obvious tells when she didn't want to show any. No predictable angles to exploit, unless someone's literal life—or Thea herself—was involved.

And Evelyne had *dug*. Thoroughly.

Especially once she realized just how close Faulkner truly was to her Thea.

Yet for all that effort, the medic remained frustratingly opaque.

Barring Thea McKay—who, for all intents and purposes, had simply not existed before her entry into the UHF, something Evelyne absolutely understood the reason for given her MMM past—Karanian Faulkner was the *only* person Evelyne had investigated since coming aboard the Sovereign whose personal history simply did *not* make sense.

On the surface, it did, of course. It *had* to.

Otherwise the UHF would never have accepted her as a Recruit.

But a Sen was not trained in information gathering, interpretation and correlation for nothing.

Faulkner's history, once broken down and analyzed the way Evelyne had done, was filled with small inconsistencies, questions and idiosyncrasies.

None of them big enough to trigger an official inquiry on their own—but the sheer number of them Evelyne had run into over the past few weeks had been staggering.

It looked almost like someone had tried—amateurishly, but with significant thought and effort—to bury a more real history beneath layers of plausible stories, documented trauma and struggles, and the convenient narrative of a troubled childhood genius.

And despite all her work, Evelyne *still* hadn't found the real version underneath.

That, more than anything, unsettled her deeply.

*'The worst part is,' she couldn't help but think, 'I've never seen her take even a single second to analyze **anything**. She just acts. Immediately. Like it's all instinct. And yet... she never makes mistakes.'*

The "childhood genius" angle clearly wasn't just a convenient cover story.

There was something real there, that much was obvious.

*'But just **how** smart are you really, Faulkner?' Evelyne wondered quietly. 'How far does that intellect go? And more importantly... where does it stop?'*

There were always limits. That was a universal truth.

Nothing in the cosmos was infinite—not power, not talent, not intelligence.

Karania Faulkner's intellect had a ceiling. She *had* to have one.

Evelyne would simply have to find it.

And once she did, she could work around her too—just like it was a Sen's right to do after all the blood, sweat, and tears poured into shaping them from a young age into what they were...